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All Foes

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IT

Annotation

A dragon. A scholar. A very short story about death.

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Killing the dragon was easy. I found it curled at the bottom of a gully, half-buried by leaves and the detritus of uncounted years. A skeleton clothed in ragged leather, only the gleam of eyes betraying the remnants of life, glinting open as I stumbled against its head. I looked deep into their darkness, and saw nothing but my own reflection.

Above I could hear the fool bellowing his challenges to an empty castle, a staggering construction of obsidian and ice well-suited for its role as an abode of evil. If evil lurked in the eyes of the decaying dragon wreck, beneath its mound of leaves, it was hidden by a film of age. I touched it, below that eye, dislodging tiny, dry scales, which pattered to the ground and lost themselves among the leaves.

Even monsters grow old. This creature, this emaciated coil of reptile, wings resembling the stripped trees of winter, did not react to my touch. I stood before it, a descendant of the race it had hunted to near-extinction, and it did not care. It was possible it did not even know what stood before it, that it was beyond recognising anything but the weight of time. I was stirred to pity. I am prone to pity, even for such as the fool above, with his shining armor and wealth and lack of heart. For myself, born with a mind above my station.

So, the object of the quest, the monster we had traipsed our long way north to slay. This head, encrusted in dirt and already weathered to the bone, was destined to adorn the wall above the throne of the one the fool was proud to serve. To bring back the head of the last Great Enemy would be a victory remembered down the ages, rewarded by fame and the largess of a grateful ruler. But not for me, whose pay had been determined at the outset. It had been a generous wage, for there were few scholars who would dare the journey, fewer still likely to survive. The money had gone to pay a debt, and the bonus hinted at by the fool would not keep me long.

I touched it again, this terror of the past, thought of the trophy it would make, the task it would be to haul it slowly south, the abuse with which it would be greeted. Ever was the courtesy awarded the defeated. The Enemy, to be conquered in righteous battle by the fool with his burning sword, humiliated in death. Did it not deserve it, after all? How many hundreds, thousands, even millions had it killed

over the centuries that its kind had warred with us? Did humankind not deserve the jubilant celebration of its death? Would it not be a crime to deny a generation of tale-makers, bards and would-be heroes the victory for which they longed?

But it was not our triumph, after all. Time had conquered the last of this dread race. It had been half-dead longer than I had been alive. What lingered I extinguished gently, with the sharpest of my blades, a wafer-thin sliver that slid between ancient scales and let the last of the blood drain free.

I hesitated then, as black ichor washed the hide. Dragon's blood. Curse or prize? Few stories documented those who had tested the effect of a draught, and every one claimed a different result. Immortality. Strange alterations to the body. One tract claimed the blood brought madness. Another suggested the power to foresee. The majority agreed that dragon's blood brought death, and differed only in describing its horror.

The scales were cold against my lips, the blood like ice in my mouth, a painful chill in my chest as I drank iron and sulfur until my stomach swelled tight. And still I drank, 'til I could hold no more. I have never believed in half-measures.

When the trembling had passed, I cleaned myself and made my way back to the others, to where the fool had finally stopped bellowing his threats and was talking of storming the castle. In time he will give up and we will return to warmer lands, claiming neither victory nor defeat. It was unlikely any would discover the body I had taken care to finish covering.

By then I may know what the blood has done to me, what I have done to myself, out of greed, or pity. It is possible I may soon regret the impulse that led me to taste the life of a dragon, but it has not killed me yet and I – I will be in a position to settle an age-old dispute. What scholar could want more?

Yet I am not satisfied.

We hunted them first, in our arrogance, to our cost. Might we not have deserved the oblivion we almost brought upon ourselves?

I dream of lifting on dragon wings.